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The relationship of language and culture

Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.

To begin with, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words also reflect their authors' attitudes and beliefs, their point of view, that are also those of others. In both cases, *language expresses cultural reality*.

But members of a community or social group do not only express experience; they also create experience through language. They give meaning to it through the medium they choose to communicate with one another, for example, speaking on the telephone or face-to-face, writing a letter or sending an e-mail message, reading the newspaper or interpreting a graph or a chart. The way in which people use the spoken, written, or visual medium itself creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to, for example, through a speaker's tone of voice, accent, conversational style, gestures and facial expressions. Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, *language embodies cultural reality*.

Finally, language is a system of **signs** that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus we can say that *language symbolizes cultural reality*.

We shall be dealing with these three aspects of language and

culture throughout this book. But first we need to clarify what we mean by culture. We might do this by considering the following poem by Emily Dickinson.

Essential Oils – are wrung –
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns – alone –
It is the gift of Screws –

The General Rose – decay –
But this – in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer – When the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary –

Nature, culture, language

One way of thinking about culture is to contrast it with nature. Nature refers to what is born and grows organically (from the Latin *nascere*: to be born); **culture** refers to what has been grown and groomed (from the Latin *colere*: to cultivate). The word culture evokes the traditional nature/nurture debate: Are human beings mainly what nature determines them to be from birth or what culture enables them to become through socialization and schooling?

Emily Dickinson's poem expresses well, albeit in a stylized way, the relationship of nature, culture, and language. A rose in a flower bed, says the poem, a generic rose ('The General Rose'), is a phenomenon of nature. Beautiful, yes, but faceless and nameless among others of the same species. Perishable. Forgettable. Nature alone cannot reveal nor preserve the particular beauty of a particular rose at a chosen moment in time. Powerless to prevent the biological 'decay' and the ultimate death of roses and of ladies, nature can only make summer when the season is right. Culture, by contrast, is not bound by biological time. Like nature, it is a 'gift', but of a different kind. Through a sophisticated technological procedure, developed especially to extract the essence of roses, culture forces nature to reveal its 'essential' potentialities. The word 'Screws' suggests that this process is not without labor. By crushing the petals, a great deal of the rose must be lost in order to get at its essence. The technology of the screws constrains the

exuberance of nature, in the same manner as the **technology of the word**, or printed syntax and vocabulary, selects among the many potential meanings that a rose might have, only those that best express its innermost truth—and leaves all others unsaid. Culture makes the rose petals into a rare perfume, purchased at high cost, for the particular, personal use of a particular lady. The lady may die, but the fragrance of the rose's essence (the Attar) can make her immortal, in the same manner as the language of the poem immortalizes both the rose and the lady, and brings both back to life in the imagination of its readers. Indeed, 'this' very poem, left for future readers in the poet's drawer, can 'Make Summer' for readers even after the poet's death. The word and the technology of the word have immortalized nature.

The poem itself bears testimony that nature and culture both need each other. The poem wouldn't have been written if there were no natural roses; but it would not be understood if it didn't share with its readers some common assumptions and expectations about rose gardens, technological achievements, historic associations regarding ladies, roses, and perfumes, common memories of summers past, a shared longing for *immortality*, a similar familiarity with the printed word, and with the vernacular and poetic uses of the English language. Like the screws of the rose press, these common collective expectations can be liberating, as they endow a universal rose with a particular meaning by imposing a structure, so to speak, on nature. But they can also be constraining. Particular meanings are adopted by the **speech community** and imposed in turn on its members, who find it then difficult, if not *impossible*, to say or feel anything original about roses. For example, once a bouquet of roses has become codified as a society's way of expressing love, it becomes controversial, if not risky, for lovers to express their own particular love without resorting to the symbols that their society imposes upon them, and to offer each other as a sign of love, say, chrysanthemums instead—which in Germany, for example, are reserved for the dead! Both oral cultures and literate cultures have their own ways of emancipating and constraining their members. We shall return to the differences between oral and literate cultures in subsequent chapters.

The screws that language and culture impose on nature

correspond to various forms of **socialization** or **acculturation**. Etiquette, expressions of politeness, social *dos* and *don'ts* shape people's behavior through child rearing, behavioral upbringing, schooling, professional training. The use of written language is also shaped and socialized through culture. Not only what it is proper to write to whom in what circumstances, but also which text genres are appropriate (the application form, the business letter, the political pamphlet), because they are sanctioned by cultural conventions. These ways with language, or norms of interaction and interpretation, form part of the invisible ritual imposed by culture on language users. This is culture's way of bringing order and predictability into people's use of language.

Communities of language users

Social conventions, norms of social appropriateness, are the product of communities of language users. As in the Dickinson poem, poets and readers, florists and lovers, horticulturists, rose press manufacturers, perfume makers and users, create meanings through their words and actions. Culture both liberates people from oblivion, anonymity, and the randomness of nature, and constrains them by imposing on them a structure and principles of selection. This double effect of culture on the individual—both liberating and constraining—plays itself out on the social, the historical and the metaphorical planes. Let us examine each of these planes in turn.

People who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighborhood, professional or ethnic affiliation, nation) acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. These views are reinforced through institutions like the family, the school, the workplace, the church, the government, and other sites of socialization throughout their lives. Common attitudes, beliefs, and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language—for example, what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it. Thus, in addition to the notion of **speech community** composed of people who use the same linguistic code, we can speak of **discourse communities** to refer to the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet

their social needs. Not only the grammatical, lexical, and phonological features of their language (for example, teenage talk, professional jargon, political rhetoric) differentiate them from others, but also the topics they choose to talk about, the way they present information, the style with which they interact, in other words, their **discourse accent**. For instance, Americans have been socialized into responding 'Thank you' to any compliment, as if they were acknowledging a friendly gift: 'I like your sweater!'—'Oh, thank you!' The French, who tend to perceive such a compliment as an intrusion into their privacy, would rather downplay the compliment and minimize its value: 'Oh really? It's already quite old!' The reactions of both groups are based on the differing values given to compliments in both cultures, and on the differing degrees of embarrassment caused by personal comments. This is a view of culture that focuses on the ways of thinking, behaving, and valuing currently shared by members of the same discourse community.

But there is another way of viewing culture—one which takes a more historical perspective. For the cultural ways which can be identified at any one time have evolved and become solidified over time, which is why they are so often taken for natural behavior. They have sedimented in the memories of group members who have experienced them firsthand or merely heard about them, and who have passed them on in speech and writing from one generation to the next. For example, Emily Dickinson's allusion to life after death is grounded in the hope that future generations of readers will be able to understand and appreciate the social value of rose perfume and the funeral custom of surrounding the dead with fragrant rosemary. The culture of everyday practices draws on the culture of shared history and traditions. People identify themselves as members of a society to the extent that they can have a place in that society's history and that they can identify with the way it remembers its past, turns its attention to the present, and anticipates its future. Culture consists of precisely that historical dimension in a group's identity. This diachronic view of culture focuses on the way in which a social group represents itself and others through its material productions over time—its technological achievements, its monuments, its works of art, its popular culture—that punctuate the development of its

historical identity. This material culture is reproduced and preserved through institutional mechanisms that are also part of the culture, like museums, schools, public libraries, governments, corporations, and the media. The Eiffel Tower or the Mona Lisa exist as material artifacts, but they have been kept alive and given the prominence they have on the cultural market through what artists, art collectors, poets, novelists, travel agents, tourist guides have said and written about them. Language is not a culture-free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture, particularly in its printed form.

Imagined communities

These two layers of culture combined, the social (synchronic) and the historical (diachronic), have often been called the **sociocultural context** of language study. There is, in addition, a third essential layer to culture, namely, the imagination. Discourse communities are characterized not only by facts and artifacts, but by common dreams, fulfilled and unfulfilled imaginings. These imaginings are mediated through the language, that over the life of the community reflects, shapes, and is a metaphor for its cultural reality. Thus the city of London is inseparable, in the cultural imagination of its citizens, from Shakespeare and Dickens. The Lincoln Memorial Building in Washington has been given extra meaning through the words 'I have a dream ...' that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke there in 1963. Rose gardens have been immortalized in the French imagination by Ronsard's poetry. Language is intimately linked not only to the culture that is and the culture that was, but also to the culture of the imagination that governs people's decisions and actions far more than we may think.

Insiders/outsideers

To identify themselves as members of a community, people have to define themselves jointly as insiders against others, whom they thereby define as outsiders. Culture, as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control. The rose press in the Dickinson poem, one could argue,

yields exquisite perfume, but at a high price. Not only must the stem and the petals be ultimately discarded, but only the rich and powerful can afford to buy the perfume. Similarly, only the powerful decide whose values and beliefs will be deemed worth adopting by the group, which historical events are worth commemorating, which future is worth imagining. Cultures, and especially national cultures, resonate with the voices of the powerful, and are filled with the silences of the powerless. Both words and their silences contribute to shaping one's own and others' culture. For example, Edward Said describes how the French constructed for themselves a view of the culture of 'the Orient' that came directly from such writers as Chateaubriand, Nerval, and Flaubert, and that only served, he says, to reinforce the sense of superiority of the European culture. The Orient itself was not given a voice. Such **orientalism**, Said argues, has had a wide-ranging effect on the way Europeans and Americans have viewed the Middle East, and imposed that view on Middle Easterners themselves, who implicitly acquiesce to it when they see themselves the way the West sees them. Similarly, scholars in Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gay Studies, have shown the **hegemonic** effects of dominant cultures and the authority they have in representing and in speaking for the Other. Ultimately, taking culture seriously means questioning the very base of one's own intellectual inquiry, and accepting the fact that knowledge itself is colored by the social and historical context in which it is acquired and disseminated. In this respect, language study is an eminently cultural activity.

As the considerations above suggest, the study of language has always had to deal with the difficult issue of **representation** and representativity when talking about another culture. Who is entitled to speak for whom, to represent whom through spoken and written language? Who has the authority to select what is representative of a given culture: the outsider who observes and studies that culture, or the insider who lives and experiences it? According to what and whose criteria can a cultural feature be called representative of that culture?

In the social, the historic, and the imagined dimension, culture is heterogeneous. Members of the same discourse community all have different biographies and life experiences, they may differ in

age, gender, or ethnicity, they may have different political opinions. Moreover, cultures change over time as we can see from the difficulty many contemporary readers might have with the Dickinson poem. And certainly Ladies in the nineteenth century imagined the world differently from readers at the end of the twentieth. Cultures are not only heterogeneous and constantly changing, but they are the sites of struggle for power and recognition, as we shall see in Chapter 7.

In summary, culture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. These standards are what is generally called their 'culture'.

The Emily Dickinson poem has served to illuminate several aspects of culture:

- 1 Culture is always the result of human intervention in the biological processes of nature.
- 2 Culture both liberates and constrains. It liberates by investing the randomness of nature with meaning, order, and rationality and by providing safeguards against chaos; it constrains by imposing a structure on nature and by limiting the range of possible meanings created by the individual.
- 3 Culture is the product of socially and historically situated discourse communities, that are to a large extent imagined communities, created and shaped by language.
- 4 A community's language and its material achievements represent a social patrimony and a symbolic capital that serve to perpetuate relationships of power and domination; they distinguish insiders from outsiders.
- 5 But because cultures are fundamentally heterogeneous and changing, they are a constant site of struggle for recognition and legitimation.

The different ways of looking at culture and its relationship to language raise a fundamental question: to what extent are the world views and mental activities of members of a social group

shaped by, or dependent on, the language they use? The theory that languages do affect the thought processes of their users has been called the theory of **linguistic relativity**.

Linguistic relativity

Philologists and linguists have been interested in the diversity of human languages and their meanings since the eighteenth century. The discovery by European scholars of oriental languages like Sanskrit, or the ability to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs at the end of the eighteenth century, coincided with a revival of nationalism in such countries as France and Germany, and was accompanied by increased interest in the unique cultural characteristics of their national languages. The romantic notion of the indissociability of language and culture promoted by German scholars like Johann Herder (1744–1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1762–1835), in part in reaction to the French political and military hegemony of the time, gave great importance to the diversity of the world's languages and cultures. These scholars put forward the idea that different people speak differently because they think differently, and that they think differently because their language offers them different ways of expressing the world around them (hence the notion of linguistic relativity). This notion was picked up again in the United States by the linguist Franz Boas (1858–1942), and subsequently by Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his pupil Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), in their studies of American Indian languages. Whorf's views on the interdependence of language and thought have become known under the name of **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**.

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis makes the claim that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves. Whorf recounts an anecdote that has become famous. While he was working as a fire insurance risk assessor, he noticed that the way people behaved toward things was often dangerously correlated to the way these things were called. For example, the sight of the sign 'EMPTY' on empty

gasoline drums would prompt passersby to toss cigarette butts into these drums, not realizing that the remaining gasoline fumes would be likely to cause an explosion. In this case, the English sign 'EMPTY' evoked a neutral space, free of danger. Whorf concluded that the reason why different languages can lead people to different actions is because language filters their perception and the way they categorize experience.

So, for example, according to Whorf, whereas English speakers conceive of time as a linear, objective sequence of events encoded in a system of past, present, and future tenses (for example, 'He ran' or 'He will run'), or a discrete number of days as encoded in cardinal numerals (for example, ten days), the Hopi conceive of it as intensity and duration in the analysis and reporting of experience (for example, *wari* = 'He ran' or statement of fact, *warikni* = 'He ran' or statement of fact from memory). Similarly 'They stayed ten days' becomes in Hopi 'They stayed until the eleventh day' or 'They left after the tenth day'.

Whorf insists that the English language binds English speakers to a Newtonian view of objectified time, neatly bounded and classifiable, ideal for record-keeping, time-saving, clock-punching, that cuts up reality into 'afters' and 'untils', but is incapable of expressing time as a cyclic, unitary whole. By contrast, the Hopi language does not regard time as measurable length, but as a relation between two events in lateness, a kind of 'eventing' referred to in an objective way (as duration) and in a subjective way (as intensity). 'Nothing is suggested about time [in Hopi] except the perpetual "getting later" of it' writes Whorf. Thus it would be very difficult, Whorf argues, for an English and a Hopi physicist to understand each other's thinking, given the major differences between their languages. Despite the general translatability from one language to another, there will always be an incommensurable residue of untranslatable culture associated with the linguistic structures of any given language.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been subject to fierce controversy since it was first formulated by Whorf in 1940. Because it indirectly made the universal validity of scientific discoveries contingent upon the language in which they are expressed, it encountered the immediate scorn of the scientific community. The positivistic climate of the time rejected any intimation that

language determined thought rather than the other way around; the proposition that we are prisoners of our language seemed unacceptable. And indeed it would be absurd to suggest that Hopis cannot have access to modern scientific thought because their language doesn't allow them to, or that they can gain a sense of Newtonian time only by learning English. One can see how a strong version of Whorf's relativity principle could easily lead to prejudice and racism. After all, it is always possible to translate across languages, and if this were not so, Whorf could never have revealed how the Hopis think. The link between a linguistic structure and a given cultural world view must, it was argued, be viewed as arbitrary.

Fifty years later, with the rise of the social sciences, interest in the linguistic relativity principle has revived. The translatability argument that was levelled against the incommensurability of cultures is not as convincing as it seemed. If speakers of different languages do not understand one another, it is not because their languages cannot be mutually translated into one another—which they obviously can, to a certain extent. It is because they don't share the same way of viewing and interpreting events; they don't agree on the meaning and the value of the concepts underlying the words. In short, they don't cut up reality or categorize experience in the same manner. Understanding across languages does not depend on structural equivalences but on common conceptual systems, born from the larger context of our experience.

The strong version of Whorf's hypothesis, therefore, that posits that language determines the way we think, cannot be taken seriously, but a weak version, supported by the findings that there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly common concepts, is generally accepted nowadays. The way a given language encodes experience semantically makes aspects of that experience not exclusively accessible, but just more salient for the users of that language.

For example, Navajo children speak a language that encodes differently through different verbs the action of 'picking up a round object' like a ball and 'picking up a long, thin, flexible object' like a rope. When presented with a blue rope, a yellow rope, and a blue stick, and asked to choose which object goes best with the

blue rope, most monolingual Navajo children chose the yellow rope, thus associating the objects on the basis of their physical form, whereas monolingual English-speaking children almost always chose the blue stick, associating the objects on the basis of their color, although, of course, both groups of children are perfectly able to distinguish both colors and shapes.

This experiment is viewed as supporting the weak version of the Whorf hypothesis that language users tend to sort out and distinguish experiences differently according to the semantic categories provided by their respective codes. But it also shows that the resources provided by the linguistic code are understandable only against the larger pragmatic context of people's experience. A Navajo child learning English might start categorizing experience in Navajo the way English speakers do. Thus, the generic semantic meanings of the code that have established themselves over time within a given discourse community are subject to the various and variable uses made of them in social contexts. We are, then, not prisoners of the cultural meanings offered to us by our language, but can enrich them in our pragmatic interactions with other language users.

Summary

The theory of linguistic relativity does not claim that linguistic structure constrains what people *can* think or perceive, only that it tends to influence what they routinely *do* think. In this regard, the work of Sapir and Whorf has led to two important insights:

- 1 There is nowadays a recognition that language, as code, reflects cultural preoccupations and constrains the way people think.
- 2 More than in Whorf's days, however, we recognize how important context is in complementing the meanings encoded in the language.

The first insight relates to culture as semantically encoded in the language itself; the second concerns culture as expressed through the actual use of the language.